

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
Impact on Pilot Shortages on Air Service to Smaller and Rural Markets
September 10, 1999
Kalispell, Montana

Chairman Burns and members of the committee, for the record my name is Mike Ferguson. I am the Administrator for the State of Montana Aeronautics Division in Helena, Montana.

The pilot shortage problem in the United States is REAL. Due to significant growth in air travel the resultant economic upturn for the airlines has resulted in huge major airline expansions. These expansions have placed an alarming hiring demand on the pilot population in this country. To meet these expansion demands the major airlines are being forced to “rob” pilots from the regional airlines placing an extreme hardship on the regional airlines. These regional airlines assume a great financial risk when they hire young pilots with minimal experience and pay for extensive training to qualify these pilots for their flying requirements. Even after extensive, costly training some of these new pilots are unable to meet the minimum requirements and another new hire is required. These same regional airline pilots are then hired away by the major airlines after gaining adequate hours and experience. The major airlines have very little risk when hiring a pilot from a regional airline. They are already assured that the pilot meets minimum qualifications and the only risk is in providing additional training in the major airlines aircraft.

The regional airlines are being forced to lower their minimum hiring requirements in order to keep pilots in the cockpit. Is the safety of the U.S. airline passenger being jeopardized?

I believe that one factor in addressing the pilot shortage problem is the FAA’s Age 60 Rule which forces air carrier pilots to retire upon reaching their 60th birthday. There are at least 44 countries that do not abide by our FAA’s Age 60 Rule. Our United States government through the FAA allow 65-year old, or older, pilots from 44 other countries worldwide to fly into the United States, carrying U.S. citizens, using our aviation services and airspace yet refuses to allow their own United States citizens to do the same. The countries of Australia, New Zealand, Chile and Canada have completely done away with any age restriction for pilots. They may continue to fly if they can pass extensive medical exams and flight checks. When questioned, the National Institute of Health has responded that “all pilots may be tested to determine their continued health and competence and that best ensures their ability to safely fly after age 60.” If a pilot can successfully pass a first class medical exam which includes an extensive mental, neurological and cardiovascular exam every six months why does our government allow the FAA to discredit the medical profession saying these same individuals are unsafe to

perform their job the day they become 60 years of age? I ask you, and myself would we rather fly with a 60-year-old physically and mentally fit 20,000 hour highly experienced pilot or a 23-year-old physically and mentally fit 300 hour minimally experienced pilot? I think we all know what our answer will be.

I believe that another factor in the pilot shortage problem is that the FAA continues to over regulate the aviation industry. The proposed flight and duty time regulations are one example. The FAA should be looking for ways to support and boost the industry rather than creating further obstacles.

The regional airlines are not the only ones impacted by the pilot shortage problem. United States taxpayers pay enormous amounts of money for young men and women to be flight trained by our military. These same individuals are being “robbed” by the major airlines. Due to military cutbacks, the military is training fewer pilots and is also placed at a disadvantage when these pilots join the airlines.

In Montana, the Essential Air Service Program is just as it is titled “essential”. Due to the vast distances in Montana this program is critical. Montana’s regional air carrier provides air service to seven essential air service communities. This service is vital to Montanans who rely on this program for medical needs, the movement of freight and mail and economic development in Montana.

The FAA must assist in solving the problem that they have helped create by rescinding the Age 60 Rule and dropping their proposal for a change in flight and duty time restrictions.

In conclusion, I respectfully urge your committee to include language in the FAA appropriations bill to mandate the FAA to present to Congress documented evidence from a credible independent medical authority why they should keep the age 60 rule and if they still maintain that there is a safety risk by allowing pilots over age 60 to fly then prohibit all foreign air carriers who allow their pilots to fly beyond age 60 from flying in United States airspace. Otherwise repeal the Age 60 Rule.

Thank you for inviting me to testify before you today.